

They Don't Believe In Us (But I Believe We're The Enemy) by eternalgoldfish

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Summary:

“Fuck,” Steve laughed, spilling scotch all over the back seat of his BMW as he tried to refill his flask. Billy leaned against his side and stole the bottle when Steve was done. He took a long swig, gasp on his tongue when he was finished.

“I didn’t know you were a light weight,” Billy teased, but his hands wobbled as he put the bottle back on the seat. The glass dinged off Steve’s bat. The liquid sloshed against the glass.

“I didn’t know you were full of shit,” Steve replied.

“Liar. We both knew that.”

1. Chapter 1

Steve woke up screaming, the sound nearly drowned by the guttural howl of a Demogorgon rattling between his ears. He coughed on the sound of it, unsure if he was inhaling or exhaling as he gasped over his bent knees, knuckles bone white were they clenched his sheets.

He was seventeen. He was in his bedroom. It was February eleventh, one in the morning, and his parents were on a business trip.

He got one good breath in and then another. When the dark seemed less dense and his digital alarm clock less menacing, he kicked his socked feet over the edge of the bed and bent to grab his bat. From that first day when the lights broke loose in the Byer's house, Steve's hand had twitched, twirling a bat that wasn't there, until it was. Either his parents hadn't noticed him sneaking it between his bedroom and his car every morning, or they thought he was going through a phase. He didn't really give a fuck.

He jogged down the stairs in socked feet by bleeding streetlights and grabbed his Chucks off a tray of heels and vacant loafers. With his letterman jacket shrugged on to his shoulders, collar up, he stepped into the night.

He twirled his wrist and blinked between the streetlights until he could breathe. By all rights, he should have feared the cold. It liked the cold, liked planting its roots deep below the earth, away from the heat of the sun. Steve followed its veins from Loch Nora through downtown, cold pinching his skin like tweezers as it combed through his hair. He shook, let the wind bite him, and tucked his spare hand into his pocket.

He wasn't sure he could feel his cheeks anymore. Maybe there was something to planting roots deep below, where nothing could burn them up. But it was a little too late for that. He'd sunk down into the earth, found hell, and lit it on fire.

He was seventeen. He was rushing through the slushy streets of Hawkins, Indiana. It was February eleventh, one thirty in the morning, and monsters with four-leafed, toothy maws scuttled inside

his eyelashes. He was going to be dead on his feet tomorrow.

Maybe he was okay now. The arcade was coming into view, its bright lights soulless bulbs in the early morning. Steve tapped his bat on the ground and turned around.

Then Billy came tumbling out of the alleyway between the butcher shop and the book store, and Steve remembered his skin under Billy's, the pain in his face, the looping, twisting Upside Down, and the scorching heat licking his back as he turned away.

It occurred to Steve that he was running the same second he leaned over Billy. The guy practically hung around the streetlamp, his eyes bleary and wild. Volatile. Dangerous. Teary.

"You alright, man?" Steve asked.

"What?" Billy snarled.

Oh. Steve was walking around at two in the morning with a baseball bat covered in nails, which was weird and probably a little serial killer chic. But Billy's eyes weren't confused as he wobbled against the lamppost and grabbed Steve's shoulder for balance, eyes glued to Steve's dangling arm. They were wide.

"Did she send you?" Billy asked slowly.

This time it was Steve's turn to ask, "What?"

"The fucking- the fucking bat." Billy tripped over his words, liquor and sleep ghosting past Steve's nose.

"Do people usually follow you with bats?" Steve asked, because what the fuck, what was he supposed to do with that?

"Don't fuck with me, Harrington," Billy growled. He shoved Steve's shoulder, the one thing keeping him from tumbling face first into the garbage bags lining the sidewalk, and nearly toppled backwards. Steve, being Steve, grabbed Billy's hip before he could become King Trash.

Wouldn't that be poetic, he thought ruefully. King Trash and King

Steve walk into deserted side street-

Not that anyone would care if Billy came to school smelling like curdled milk and Dunkin' Donuts. Billy was plastered, so plastered, and if word reached the school that he'd spent all night wandering around the streets on a bender, making out with alley cats, it would only increase rebellious cool. You guys hear about Hargrove? He's tough shit. He doesn't give a fuck about anything.

Steve almost missed not giving a fuck about anything. Billy's fingernails gripping into the exposed skin at Steve's cuff made his breath catch. "What do you want?" Billy asked.

"Go home, Billy." Steve pushed him back, just hard enough to set him upright. "You're shitfaced. What did you do with your jacket?"

Billy looked down at his open shirt, as if realizing, for the first time, that it was fucking February. He scrunched his nose. "It's at home. Doesn't matter."

"Where's your car?"

"I don't know."

"You don't-" Steve took a deep breath. What was he even doing? Last time he'd spoken to Billy, actually spoken to Billy, he'd gotten a plate smashed over his head and his face tenderized. He still had some of the scars on his cheeks from where the skin had broken harshly along his laugh lines, so the healing broke open every time he smiled.

This waiting was too long for Billy. He pushed Steve off and leaned against the lamppost, clumsily pulling a pack of smokes from his back pocket and miraculously getting one to light. He clutched it by his lips so the ember rest just shy of the short curls of hair around his ears.

"Fuck off," he said. "You don't care, so just fuck off. Jesus."

"I could care," Steve countered.

"But you don't." Billy exhaled smoke. "The great King Steve, protector of the little weirdos, only cares about himself and his pack

of misfit idiots. Don't try to dad me, Harrington. I've got one already, and he's kind of shit."

"Then go home."

"You couldn't make me."

"You're going to die out here, Christ, it's like five degrees."

Billy leveled Steve with a look loaded with something feral, something monstrous, and Steve felt his breath catch again, found himself clutching his bat tighter.

"What is this, princess? A guy makes you eat shit and what, you get some little crush? You follow him around town at night like some-pathetic stalker? Your ex drops you for some weird stoner and you drop your panties for the next real man who comes along? Should have pegged you for a desperate slut when you were moaning about that bitch."

Steve knew when he was being riled. And it fucking worked.

"At least I'm not a *coward* who picks on *children*."

Billy shot forward, cigarette first, and Steve dropped his bat.

They met in the middle, teeth grit and nails biting as they grappled shoulders, Steve's knee coming up to catch Billy in the chest as Billy wheeled back to clobber Steve sloppily in the cheek. Drunk or not, Billy was strong, so strong that with the wind knocked out of him he could still twist and slam Steve into the lamppost, head hitting hard against the metal.

"I'm going to rip your guts out," Billy growled.

With teeth that bared, Steve didn't doubt it.

Except Steve wasn't drunk, and when he pushed back with ringing ears and kicked Billy in the stomach, Billy screamed and went down like a dropped bag of onions.

Steve wiped the blood from his mouth. He didn't kick him *that* hard.

“Get the fuck up,” he said, but Billy stayed down, clutching his ribs like he was holding them together.

“Oh come *on*,” Steve groaned, picking up his bat. “One kick, really?”

He grabbed Billy’s shoulders and jerked him to his feet, letting the guy rest heavy against his side as he followed the flickering streetlights back to Loch Nora. His ears stung and Billy hissed like a popped air mattress.

“Fuck you,” Billy slurred, about fifteen minutes later. “Where are you taking me?”

But when they reached the mouth of Steve’s driveway, almost twenty minutes later, he didn’t make a peep.

Steve could count the old grandfather clock in the hallway ticking between his breaths, could feel the cool sheets on his cooler skin. Nancy spun behind his eyes, her pale pink summer dress wrapping around her legs as she twisted and turned. She’d put her hair up, but the wind and humidity had pulled loose curls free, so when she bent to dip her hands in the cool spring her hair fell across her face in small tides.

When Steve rolled over, he could feel her warmth at his back. He wore summer like a blanket.

Steve woke with a bruised cheek, an alarm ringing in his ear, and a solid arm speckled with blonde hairs jutting into his neck. Yes, he had a guest room, and yes, it occurred to him now that he should have used it, but when he’d pulled Billy upstairs, dead tired and head aching, his thoughts had primarily focused on sleep. Billy was boneless on the edge of Steve’s bed before Steve had even gotten his shoes off, and well, Steve hadn’t had the heart to kick him out.

Or maybe it was just three in the morning and he was fucking done

with everything.

“Get off,” He groaned, pushing Billy’s shoulder.

It was still dark outside, winter casting the early morning in shadows, and Steve wondered where he’d dropped his bat. It was probably in the front hall. Jesus, he hoped his parents weren’t on their way home. It was one thing to find a pseudo-morning star hanging out by the coat rack, but it was a whole other to find sloppy Billy Hargrove curled in their son’s bed, arms hugging his chest and muddy combat boots still tied tight.

Steve sucked in a breath, found clothes and locked himself in his bathroom to fight his half-deflated hair. He was seventeen. He was in his bathroom. His lip was split, it was February eleventh, seven in the morning, and Billy Hargrove was asleep in the next room. Shit.

He scrubbed the tired veins under his eyes and tapped his lip with Vaseline.

Did he kick Billy out? Did he ask him he wanted a ride to school? Was there protocol to bringing home a guy you fought on a street corner? Not that Steve brought him home. Not like that. He had to get his head away from one-night stands and slipping girls in and out his front door when his parents were away. This was more like giving Dustin a place to crash, if Dustin was seventeen, completely unlikable, and on the verge of fifteen drunk and disorderlies.

So maybe he was nothing like Dustin at all, but Steve was running out of comparisons. His last real buddy was Tommy H, and he wasn’t really the sleepover type. He came over if Carol was coming over, and Steve wanted to trust that they behaved in the guest bedroom.

“You up?” Steve asked as he stepped out of the bathroom.

Billy lay on his side with his hair in his face, shoulders scrunched up to his ears.

Steve nodded. Cool, cool. He walked around the bed and threw a black crewneck at the skeleton under his covers.

“Fuck you,” Billy growled.

“So you do remember where you are,” Steve said, throwing a shirt next. “Get up and put these on. You smell like shit.”

“You’re shit.”

“Thank you.”

Billy glowered, but shucked off the sheets and stomped to the bathroom with his new pile of threads. When he came back, he’d just put on the sweater, but it was better than the stained, wrinkled red button up he’d slept in. There was probably some beer soaked into the old shirt, too. Some crusted blood. Billy was a real fashion icon.

“I’ve got to pick Dustin up on the way,” Steve said between pulling on socks.

“You driving me to school, too?”

“Yeah, unless you want to go pick up Max?”

Billy made a face. “She’s got a skateboard.”

Steve shut the car door and revved the ignition. Billy sat with one knee up and his elbow propped up by the window, hand in his hair, glaring at the neighbour’s lawnmower like it had slandered Mötley Crüe.

“Why do you drive these brats to school, anyway?” Billy asked. “Secret brother complex? Fucking Mrs. Henderson?”

It was Steve’s turn to make a face.

“Gross. You clearly haven’t seen her. We’ve just got this deal. She’s a single mom, you know, it’s hard, and Dustin’s a good kid. I’m just helping out,” he said, tight lipped against the spill of words twisting in his gut. Weird shit happens in Hawkins. Kids go missing. Monsters burble out of holes in walls. Barb fell into a parallel universe and we never saw her again.

“How *were* you ever popular?” Billy wondered.

Steve tightened his hands on the steering wheel and took the first left. "Probably false advertising."

Dustin strongly resembled a rubber chicken with pop-out eyes when he slid into the back seat of Steve's car, only a few minutes later. "Am I in the wrong place?" he asked.

"Kid, I've been asking myself that all morning," Billy replied around a cigarette.

Steve rolled his eyes as he pulled away from the curb with one hand, held his smoke with the other, and turned up Cyndi Lauper.

When they got to school, Steve popped the trunk to get their bags and stared into the well. He'd left his bat in the front hall, nestled between the banister and the umbrella rack. Billy reached around him and grabbed out the bags before slamming the trunk shut.

2. Chapter 2

One of the lights in the hallway at school had a broken bulb. That was the first thing Steve noticed when he'd wandered into school hours ago. He was seventeen. He was in Hawkins High, Indiana. It was February fifteenth, eleven thirty in the morning, and he'd just shoved through a gaggle of freshmen clogging the hall to get to his locker. After seeing the light down the hall flicker for the eighteenth time, his heart was starting to do something weird.

Some dipshit had scrawled motherfucker in Sharpie across the lower left-hand side of his locker door, and actually, he was okay with it. It gave his locker a little character, a little spunk, or maybe it was just how he was feeling between Valentine's Day and his head still pounding from the amount of rum he'd knocked back in his father's study last night.

Last year he'd spent Valentine's Day with an arm wrapped around Nancy and his nose pressed into her hair. This year he'd spent it on a romantic date with Bacardi. Was the resentment or the booze talking? He stuffed his Marlboros in his locker and slammed the door shut. It was probably a lot of both.

His mom hated when he smoked in the house, but she hadn't been around lately, and his fingers itched to hold a cigarette the same way his wrist rolled when his bat was still in the boot of his car. Last night, he'd wanted to know if there were even stars beyond the beige siding that coiled around his house, or if the world dropped away to nothing the second he stepped inside, so he'd sucked in each breath of smoke like the oxygen was going to choke him out, hung his head along the back of his father's recliner, and suddenly understood all that shit Nancy used to explain about metaphysics and causality, morality.

But in the morning light, Steve didn't know shit. The same pieces he'd had for the last day, and the last week, and the last three months were all staring him in the face in the same arrangement, and knowing he could never understand the universe outside his own consciousness was garbage. Completely useless. Because between the things out there that could rattle and gurgle and splinter from the

Upside Down to say hello, and Nancy smiling about Steve being her *best friend*, Steve was pretty sure all his shit was going to hit the fan regardless of whether or not he aced his philosophy test.

“Excuse me,” he said, while pushing the students in the hall apart with his hands.

Nancy was already standing at her locker when he got there, her nose in a half-open chemistry book. Steve tugged on her hair and she whirled, eyebrows pinched and eyes bright, before she realized Steve was there to grab her in a hug.

“Glad to see you too,” Steve joked, rocking Nancy’s laughing shoulders twice before letting her go.

“You jerk.” She slapped his shoulder.

“Still speechless by my charm,” he said, running a hand over his hair.

“Please.” She rolled her eyes.

“Are you coming to that party at Carol’s coming up? I hear there’s going to be pizza. The good kind. With pineapple.”

“Ugh.” Nancy scrunched her nose. “I think we’re going to pass. Jonathan has tickets to this show in Chicago. Don’t ask me what they’re called, I genuinely don’t know. He says they’re so underground that they haven’t been ruined by producers yet, or something.

“So that’s a no to whenever Madonna swings by?”

Nancy smiled, cheeks dimpling like commas as she shook her head. There was the pause in their conversation, the stilt in her voice as she said, “We might be on our own for that one.”

Warmth started low in Steve’s ribs, crawling ever so subtly up until it lodged like a gobstopper between his tonsils. He regretted his cozy green crewneck.

“On your own for what?” Jonathan asked. Steve had accepted

Jonathan over a year ago, the two of them bonded by flashing Christmas lights, pressed between death and the Demogorgon, but that hadn't made Jonathan's ability to creep people out any less. Maybe it was the hair, or the part where Jonathan smelled like a hippie commune.

"Madonna," Nancy said, smiling like sugar.

Jonathan seemed to consider, before leaning in to kiss Nancy's cheek. "Nancy, apple of my eye, star in my sky, you couldn't pay me."

Steve leaned back on his heels as Jonathan caged Nancy into her locker with his elbows. He kissed her like he'd earned that right, like he cared, and Steve's limbs ached with phantom memory, like a retired dancer swaying to a ballet on tv, and he could feel himself leaning forward too with a wobbly exhale.

"Looks like it's just us," Steve said, half-laugh tumbling to the floor. "I've got to go talk to Coach. See you around." He turned on his heel before he could catch Nancy's expression. It was better that way.

Steve pushed into the bathroom and locked the door, leaned against the wood and tilted his head back with a soft thump. He took one breath and then another, tried to will his bones from boiling to sub-zero. Frost covered mountains. The ice in a cooler. Indiana in February.

Seeing Nancy and Jonathan shouldn't hurt so much. He gave them his fucking *blessing*. But every now and then it caught him off guard, how beautiful Nancy looked in the pasty fluorescent lights, how goddamn much he still cared.

He was seventeen. He was in Hawkins, Indiana. It was February fifteenth, eleven fifty in the morning, and even his hair felt like shit.

Someone cleared their throat. Steve's eyes shot open. Billy stood against the line of mirrors with a cigarette dangling between his teeth, his button up undone and shrugged down to his elbows. His

torso was mottled like rotten fruit.

Slowly, Billy pulled the cigarette from his mouth and turned to lean against the sink. He ran his tongue over his teeth. "What, like what you see?"

Billy's mouth was obscene, but didn't detract from his stomach. Burst veins licked along Billy's sides and bloomed black around his ribs. Stains followed the trail of hairs disappearing below his waistband. Steve prided himself on being a decent fighter, but there was no way his few stiff kicks had done that damage, not at three in the morning, not four days ago.

The other morning, Billy had crumpled like a pop can, but he hadn't gone shirtless in gym class in over two weeks. Steve thought he might be sick.

"Jesus, Billy."

"Yeah, I should have locked that door."

"Have you shown someone? A doctor?"

"To do what, exactly?" Billy took a drag. "Poke me a bit, say yup, definitely broken? Looking in the mirror's a hell of a lot cheaper."

Steve edged around the side of the room and set his books on the lip of a sink. Billy eyed him like an animal sizing up prey, trying to decide if the sprint was worth the meal, and a dark voice sunk deep in Steve's mind, right by the Demogorgon's growl, thought he might be better off chewed up and choked down by those teeth.

"Does Max have you watching me or something?" Billy asked. He shrugged his shirt back on and did up the buttons, stopping one above the green and purple cosmos circling his belly button.

"Why would she do that?" Steve asked, pointedly keeping his eyes on his reflection as Billy pulled on a sweater. It was cold in Indiana, Steve had heard Billy whine in the locker room at some point. Cold Steve's ass.

Billy turned back around to lean against the sink and took a long

drag, cigarette pinched between his forefinger and thumb. He gasped towards the speckled ceiling tiles. "She's got to check in on mean ol' Billy, make sure he's staying in line," he finally said, "Aren't you part of their little gossip circle?"

"I'm a party member," Steve confirmed, before snorting. "Well, honorary." And the irony of how fucking *lame* that sounded was not lost on him. Back before Nancy, he'd have eaten guys like him for breakfast.

"Yeah, that bullshit." Billy gestured vaguely with his cigarette. Steve's eyes caught on the ember, mouth dry and hands reckless. The next time Billy set the smoke between his teeth, Steve was stealing it from his lips.

"You shouldn't smoke in school, Hargrove."

"You fucking golden boy," Billy hissed. He spun quickly, arm raised, but pulled his punch just shy of Steve's mouth. Steve held the cigarette with his smirk.

"I said you *shouldn't*," Steve corrected, exhaling. "Thanks for sharing."

Billy stuffed his hands in his pockets and turned back to the mirror. Steve could already feeling the tension bleeding out of his shoulders as the chemicals swept past his tongue, reminding his lungs to expand. After a moment, Billy cursed and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, enjoy it," he said. "Shit, you better lock the door behind me."

Steve blew smoke towards the ceiling and watched it swirl around the vent, wishing, not for the first time, that his school was less shitty and more like the highly funded schools in movies, the ones with polished bathroom stalls and stylized, opaque square accent windows. Maybe schools in California were like that, he thought, as Billy stepped out and the bathroom door slammed shut.

It wasn't that the kids really *needed* babysitting. They were thirteen.

If they had younger siblings, realistically, they could be babysitters themselves. It was more that Steve had found himself with more morals than he knew what to do with lately, and when Dustin had looked at him with hope in his eyes and a can of Farrah Fawcett hairspray in his hand, Steve knew he was stuck. Mrs. Henderson spotting him standing in her front hall just cemented his conviction. She liked thinking that there was a respectable young man keeping an eye on her son. Steve liked thinking maybe he was respectable.

The rest of the brats were a package deal. People said things. Word spread that all Steve's friends were under thirteen and the social ladder he used to stand on top of snapped right through the middle of every rung.

It was better like this. Teenagers were vicious. They put cages around their hearts, then hung them around their necks. They wielded sharp words like sticks. Kids could be mean, but they were still learning how to poke where it hurt. Steve used to be real good at it.

Being thirteen had been easier, even with puberty, and Tommy falling in love with Carol before Steve had even kissed a girl, and wondering where to get beer when you were five foot one and gangly as fuck. Steve couldn't send a Demodog back to hell, but he could help Dustin pass the basketball unit in gym class and explain girls to Lucas Sinclair.

It had been a long time since any one had expected more from him than a solid keg stand. He was pretty sure all of this made him a mentor. A baby sitter, rather than a fellow baby.

He high fived the kids as they crawled into his backseat and fought over who had to sit bitch. He told himself it wasn't about being alone.

Guitars screeched over Carol's stereo. Someone had brought a confetti canon, but Steve hadn't seen it. One second the air was clear, the next people were shouting over the music as tiny specs of pink, silver and gold rained over the living room. Bits and pieces got stuck in Laurie's hair as she smiled and wrapped a hand behind Steve's

neck. Steve thought of loose fibres twisting in a parallel dimension and pulled Laurie closer to kiss a familiar neck.

He didn't miss her. He never really had. But she wore sheer plum lipstick and a pink turtle neck and Steve could remember what her bra looked like under her shirt, when it wasn't just an awkward crease giving away her underwear.

She had great tits and a thin waist. She enjoyed gym class, loved Duran, Duran, and could pull her pinky all the way back to her wrist to scare people at parties. Steve kissed her like he'd never let her go, like he hadn't made out with Becky under the bleachers one week into them dating, and like her screwing Ronnie Darlton hadn't happened. Not that either of them had cared about those things.

Steve was seventeen. He was in Carol's house, Hawkins, Indiana. It was February twenty sixth, eleven thirty at night, and as he bobbed his head along to Bon Jovi he couldn't help but wonder why he'd ever let Laurie go.

She was perfect. Her laugh was perfect. The way she knocked back her head to drink and sent her hair spilling over her shoulders was perfect. They'd both gone through a stack of solo cups over the last two hours and Steve could feel the buzz of it layered over his arms as he held her around the waist and pumped his fist in the air. They were limbs of the same creature.

"Haven't seen you this revved up in a while," Laurie purred into Steve's ear, once she'd gotten him pinned up against the floral wallpaper in Carol's laundry room. "Didn't think we'd see you again."

"Is it really like me to miss a party?" He asked, tucking his hands around her waist so he could pop her up onto the washing machine. He leaned back and searched her. "Really? Me? When?"

Laurie tilted her head and unbuttoned her shirt, commanding Steve to watch as she slipped a pinky under one button at a time. "Never, never," she said as she shook her head. Curls caught on the shoulders of her blouse. "But you were boring, with Wheeler."

Whatever dormant pain always lingered in Steve's chest twitched,

shook off its dust, and roared. The oil in his belly caught fire as he caged Laurie in with his arms and pressed her against the metal. "Honey, I've never been boring."

"Prove it."

Steve slid Laurie's underwear back on and kissed her abdomen. She pushed him back with her knees and hopped off the machine, her curls bouncing against her back as she searched in the dark for her bra. "If you were that rough when we were dating, I wouldn't have slept around," she said. "You held out on me. I want rain checks."

The further she went into the room, the less the porch light shining through the window caught on her back, her hips, as she shuffled around with her hands. With heavy breaths, Steve tucked himself back into his pants and counted the minutes between arriving at the party, finding his first drink, and fucking up one of the only relationships he'd ever tied up nicely with a zip-tie.

"Yeah, I'll get back to you on that," he lied. "Aren't you dating Todd now?"

Laurie's eyes caught in the light as she shook her head. "He's old news. Just give me a call, yeah? You've still got my number."

And Steve didn't miss her, had never missed her, but thought about it.

Steve stepped out into the night with a fresh cigarette cupped in front of his mouth and smoke blowing out his nose. People had trampled up and down Carol's lawn, mucking up the fresh snow before it could even finish falling. The heat from Laurie's eyes still wriggled in his chest as closed his eyes on the cold. He was in Hawkins, Indiana. It was February twenty seventh, probably, but he had no fucking clue what time it was.

Someone had made a snow angel and Steve was damn near tempted

to make his own. It would lick the heat right out of him. He just needed to find a spot where the snow still glistened under the moonlight, where his imprint might stay until the next thaw, where it might matter to someone.

He followed the web of footprints towards the curb, around the trampled English style gardens he knew were hiding under the snow, and beyond the boulder snuggled up by the tree. It was only once he had passed that he realized that the boulder would be the perfect hiding spot for his art. No one would walk over it. No one would walk close enough to slip around it.

But there was a problem. He turned back and Billy lay in the snow with his head tossed back against the stone. Some of his hair was frozen into the ice, some stuck to his face with spit. He propped himself upright with one arm against the tree. The other arm held an empty flask.

“Dude, this is the second time,” Steve said.

“I’ve got a jacket,” Billy corrected, shaking his flask.

Steve sucked on his cigarette and sighed into the sky, before flopping down against the boulder as well. Billy wobbled a bit before taking the cigarette for a long, pensive drag. Or maybe Billy was tired and Steve was projecting.

“You going to go home this time?” Steve asked. Behind them, a door to the house opened and closed, a spill of AC/DC and voices tumbling out into the snow before being sucked up by a vacuum.

“Nope.”

Steve tilted along the rock until his shoulder was flush with Billy’s. Like this, he could see the stars through the tree branches. He could also steal his Marlboro back. Billy dropped his flask and let his hand sit heavy on Steve’s knee, where his thumb dug circles between the joints. So Steve took another drag, counted the minutes from when he’d arrived at the party, counted the stars up above them, and decidedly didn’t count the seconds they sat there in the cold, Billy’s hand on him and his head somewhere else.

Whatever this feeling was, it was going to stick with him until the eleventh hour. He could feel the chill of it in his bones, the creature breathing down his neck, the heartbeat by his side. He saw it in Laurie's eyes. He felt it in Billy's hand.

"Come on, I'll walk you home."

"I'm not going home," Billy snapped, taking his hand back with it.

"What would be so bad about home?" Steve asked, his eyes rolling in his voice.

Billy pushed Steve's shoulder off next. "Shut the fuck up," he said. "You don't know shit. You don't *need* to know. So get off my dick. I'm not going home. My dad would kill me. And that's it. There it is. Mystery solved. I'm not going. So leave me alone."

The bit of momentum from Billy's push was enough to get Steve up and out of the snow, powder falling off his damp jeans as he scrambled to find his footing. Billy was probably soaked, sitting in the snow for so long.

"Fine, get up," Steve said.

Billy sneered. "Why?"

Throwing the cigarette butt over the rock, Steve stepped forward, the next step bringing him even Billy's shins. Billy smacked at him, but there was no real fight. No, if Billy Hargrove wanted a fight, he'd make it happen. He let Steve pluck him off the ground like a stone.

Steve didn't say anything until they were unlocking his front door on February twenty seventh, two sixteen in the morning. "You can use the guest room," he said, but Billy stomped out his boots and followed Steve up to his room anyway.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi, hello, just checking in, seeing how things are going. Do you need more breadsticks? But really, I

hope you're enjoying the story so far. In theory, I should be posting one chapter a week from here out. This chapter was intended to be posted yesterday, though, so really, who knows?

I have tumblr again! Hit me up @eternalgoldfish. Seriously. I have like, one follower, and I think it's a bot.

3. Chapter 3

Coach had blown his whistle eight times, approximately the same number of times Steve had woken up last night, breathless and burning up. Shapeshifting demodogs slunk behind his eyelids when he blinked, so he did his best to keep his eyes wide and poised on the ceiling, away from tunnels and soft earth and the memory of Billy's arm pressed into his side back in February.

He had dreamed of Nancy in her flowing summer dress, covered head to toe in spidery vines and ichor. The sweltering heat of summer suffocated him from all sides. He gasped in the evening, gasped through six cigarettes, and ignored the ticking alarm clock down the hall that told him about the minutes and hours he'd spent feverish over flashing Christmas lights.

He was seventeen. He was in Hawkins High, Indiana. It was March fourth, four in the afternoon, and he couldn't focus on a goddamn thing other than basketball. Sleep deprivation had given him laser focus, or something, and the harder he pushed his muscles, the more they obeyed.

"Harrington, glad to see you with us today," Coach called.

Steve hadn't played a proper game of ball in a long fucking time. He'd been their captain, their leader, their *team mom*, but his head hadn't been in it. Coach had picked him to be captain because he could make people *bleed*, not because he was great at making friendship bracelets.

"Thanks, Coach," he called back, before stealing the ball from Tommy H's hands and ripping down the court. Steve was skins for once and flexed as he moved, just in case the showers had masked what he usually hid under baby blue polo shirts and soft cream crewnecks.

Billy was shirts again. Billy never wanted to be shirts. He hadn't been shirts since that party last month, and Steve didn't know if the shirt now meant something, or if Coach was just fucking with them by unbalancing the norm.

Steve's lay-up was smooth. Tommy fumbling behind him would have all been fine, had Tommy stayed in his lane, but when Steve stopped on a dime and turned back towards the court, Tommy didn't, and before Steve could figure out what to do with his elbows or how to dodge, he was walking face first into his sweaty mess of an ex-best friend. Tommy wheeled backwards. Steve fell on his ass.

"Jesus, Tommy, watch where you're fucking going," Steve spat. Literally spat. Tommy's shoulder had hit him in the jaw on the way down.

"Shut up, Harrington, it was one bump," Tommy said, wiping his hands on his shirt. "You don't have to be a little bitch about it."

Steve jerked to his feet. "Oh, I'm the bitch?" he asked. He stood tall and pushed forward, trying to funnel some of his old school bravado through his eyes as he met Tommy with their noses nearly brushing. "If I'm such a bitch, you should be able to keep the ball away from me."

Coach blew his whistle. Steve gave Tommy's arm a stiff shove before stepping back to take his place at the head of their starting play.

Steve's veins pulsed, shaken like telephone wires twisting in a storm. His skin was too tight. The gym was too hot.

Billy stared at him across the starting line, hands on his hips and lip between his teeth, looking like he'd just discovered a new species of reptile and wasn't sure what kind of paddles he'd need for his curiosity voyage.

Coach threw the ball into the court. Steve sprung up, smacked the ball to his team at the same Billy swung and almost hit his arm. Steve laughed, a short, surprised burst, before darting around Billy. It wasn't the first time Steve'd tipped the jump ball in his team's favour, but the electricity had him vibrating. Vicious.

They thundered down the court, Harold passing to Ben, who passed the ball to Steve where he stood at the top of the key. Billy was in front of him, then, to block the shot, arms raised and eyes fierce.

"Try it, pretty boy," Billy taunted, chest heaving, mouth slightly parted. His blonde hair curled with sweat around his ears and his shirt stuck to his chest. He was fucking gorgeous, and Steve's thoughts spilled across his face.

Billy blinked, arms still up, but mouth shut. "What-" he started, but Steve didn't have time for the coil of fond warmth under his ribcage, nearly suffocated by the inferno filling the rest of his limbs. He got his shit together, took the shot, and made an unapologetic swish.

"Hey, Harrington," Billy said a few minutes later, plastered against Steve's back as Steve dribbled the ball.

"Hey," Steve said.

"This remind you of anything?" Billy asked. He huddled closer, breathed on Steve's neck.

"Yeah." Steve turned sharp and shoved Billy over. "Plant your fucking feet."

Billy was done in the showers and clothed before the rest of the team had even undressed, but he took his time drying his hair and leaning over the sinks on the far side of the room, doing the best he could for his mullet with a little bit of mouse and a fine tipped comb.

Steve, on the other hand, stayed under the spray a long time, acutely aware of where Billy was in relation to himself, more aware than he'd ever been before. He knew Billy was attractive the way he knew that Hawkins was boring and his mother's cooking tasted like mud. Steady, consistent, undeniable in Steve's mind. He hadn't missed Billy's looks, he'd ignored them, too caught up with Nancy and school and the upside down, and Billy's violent temper, and the way Billy treated the kids.

Besides, Steve wasn't gay, and if he was, he'd have better tastes than Billy fucking Hargrove.

But he knew the shape of Billy's hand and how it fit perfectly around his knee, and the shape of Billy's chest as it formed around his back, both on the court and on that chilly night in February, when they were drunk and Billy smelled like petrichor and vodka.

The way Billy touched him was innocent, but in retrospect his hands spoke volumes. Steve cursed and smacked the shower handle, making it cold. He wanted to read every book. He thought of Nancy, preparing to fight everyone's demons, powerful and protective, and closed his eyes against the rushing spray, lips burning and heat choking his throat, hoping to rid the flames from his bones.

"Some practice," Steve said, sitting on the lip of the counter, head leaned against the mirror and toes dangling down to the floor.

Billy glanced at him from the corner of his eye, where he still stood picking at his hair. "You hit your head or something?" He asked.

"Tommy H did hit me pretty hard," Steve admitted.

Billy rolled his eyes and set down his comb. "That's not what I mean. Do you need something? 'Cause I got to say, talking to you is never really the highlight of my day, and I've got shit to do. I've got to pick up Max."

"I thought she had a skateboard," Steve said, smirking.

A tight, grim smile dimpled Billy's face. "She's also got a big fucking mouth. I got in shit for that."

"I get that." Steve kicked his feet a little. "All the kids knew how to ride bikes before Claudia decided I was designated driver."

"Claudia?"

"Dustin's mom."

Billy snorted. "You're totally fucking her."

"Ugh. I'm not a motherfucker. Which, Mrs. Wheeler won't shut up

about you, what the hell did you do?"

Billy shrugged, but his smile was forced. "Played my cards. I'm good with parents."

"I bet." Steve ran a hand through his hair. "You'd have to be, for your parents to put up with the shit you pull."

Billy stepped between Steve's knees, all humour gone from his face. He leaned right in until Steve could nearly taste his breath and feel the danger on his tongue.

Steve was seventeen. He was in Hawkins, Indiana. It was March fourth, five fifteen in the afternoon, and Billy smelt like stale rum and cheap shampoo. He had one of those looks on his face that warned of danger, beware of dog, sharp teeth, may bite.

"I'm going to be real nice and not smash your face in for that," Billy growled, mean and low, to cover the hurt in his eyes.

"Shit, I'm sorry," Steve said, voice just above a whisper.

Billy searched his face before lightly shoving his shoulder. Everyone had left the change room already, leaving them alone with lingering shower steam, chipped red lockers, and busted linoleum. Billy's eyes were ocean blue in the dim lights.

Steve's chest was tight again. It was connected to the twist he'd felt in his stomach for days, the one that came right before the spasm. He didn't know what he needed, just that he needed to do something, *now*.

He darted forward, impulsive, and kissed Billy. For one, reckless second, his chest rose. Calm like summer bloomed in his shoulderblades. Then Billy reared back and punched him in the mouth. Steve's head smacked back into the glass, and that was all it took for the summer to swelter, to lick outwards and burn through his veins, all the way up to his eyes and the sharp ache at the back of his head. It collected in hot pools behind his lashes.

He refused to call this by its name.

"I'm not a faggot," Billy hissed, so Steve kicked him in the chest, hard, and jumped off the counter to follow it with his fist. Billy staggered and hit the locked plastic door of a handicap stall, out of order like everything else in the shitty school, and bounced back in time to grab Steve's fist.

Billy pushed and pushed, right until Steve's hips hit the counter with a yelp. Steve knew that'd bruise, as well as the fist to his left cheekbone and the sharp pain in his heart. "Neither am I," he ground out, before pushing Billy back.

Steve had never won a fight in his life, but that didn't mean he couldn't come out swinging, roar on his tongue. He scratched Billy's face, pulled his hair, fought like a girl, because that could be his edge. Billy grappled him and swung him around, but Steve just needed to get enough hurt in to get it out of his blood.

Billy tackled him to the lockers, caged him in like prey, and glared him down. It was either the lighting, or hysteria, or optimism in Steve's gut, but he could have sworn Billy had pinpricks of tears in his eyes. Impossible, unfathomable.

"I should kill you," Billy said.

"Maybe you should," Steve agreed.

Billy's hands slipped, but their chests stayed close, until Billy's head hit Steve's shoulder like a boat finding shore. Steve touched the ripples, matched Billy's grasp around his hips, and stared at the locker room door. Was there even anything on the other side, or were the philosophers right, and existence ended with consciousness? Was there anything more than Billy's breath coating his neck and the dinged locker chilling his spine?

Billy held Steve down until they no longer shook, and when he finally pulled away, eyes red rimmed, he grabbed his gym bag like it was nothing.

Steve was seventeen. He was leaning against his car in Hawkins,

Indiana. It was March seventh, eight thirty at night, and he was genuinely starting to wonder how he'd ended up eating dinner at the Wheeler's, again, when Nancy wasn't home. He'd come to drop off the kids at noon and was told to be back by five, even though the kids never finished before seven. But he'd said, okay, fine, he'd come back, they better be ready.

The kids had not been ready, but Mrs. Wheeler had a full spread made and not enough mouths to feed. Steve'd been tasked with running plates of food up and down the stairs to five ungrateful preteens, before being roped into feeding Holly scoops of roly peas over his own mashed potatoes.

The kicker, really, was that Mr. Wheeler had gone out for the evening and Mrs. Wheeler had to take an important phone call half an hour into the three and a half hours Steve was stuck in the house. It would have been rude to leave, which was how he ended up sitting on the Wheeler's couch with Holly sleeping on his chest for two and a half hours.

Rationally, Steve knew there were worse things than accidentally babysitting his ex's little sister, but by the time the third Magnum, P.I. rerun came on, he was beginning to wonder what they were. The whole house smelled like the perfume Nancy's mother wore, the one that clung to Nancy and Mike like smoke stuck to Steve. The rug in front of the TV was frayed from where Steve had accidentally stabbed a screwdriver through it while helping Mr. Wheeler set up their new coffee table, and there was a scuff on the wall by the stairs from where Nancy had pushed him into it, one night when her parents weren't home.

He'd nearly dropped Holly in his haste to leave the minute Mrs. Wheeler told the kids to get out of her house. But of course, the kids had to dawdle, so Steve leaned against the cool metal of his BMW and smoked into the stars.

"You guys ready, or what?" He called without looking as the front door opened.

"You're smoking, *again*?" Dustin asked as he lead the pack.

"I've always smoked," Steve said, stomping the cigarette out with one Chuck as he turned to get into the car. Max flopped into the passenger seat beside him, clearly mad about something and fed up with dealing with boys. Steve could respect that. His patience for the evening was running bone dry, as well.

He checked his lights and peeled away from the curb, ignoring Nancy's ghosts sitting heavy on his shoulders and the monster breathing down his neck.

"There's all these studies about smoking being linked to cancer," Dustin said, wriggling between Lucas and Will in the back seat. He looked small in the rear-view mirror.

"Then don't start," Steve said. "Christ, you're worse than Nancy." Who was known to smoke once in a while too, along with her stoner boyfriend. Steve's hands tightened on the wheel. His heart shook.

The next time Dustin opened his mouth, two minutes later in a cul-de-sac lined with squat houses with pink and yellow trim, Steve looked into the gray evening and took a sharp left.

Steve always dropped off Max last. He liked the long drive past the Byers' that looped through the woods, which were always still and quiet, where he could roll his window down just low enough to smell crisp snow and pine. Sometimes Max would tell him about a game she had been playing, or something she was working on for school, or a kid-date she was going on with Lucas. Other times, like tonight, she sat silent as the woods and watched the trees creak by.

Sometimes, Steve thought he saw demodogs between the trees, mouths gaping and tails swaying. He thought he could smell blood and rancid spittle. Tonight, he kept his bat tucked in the well by Max's feet, in case he needed it, and let the frost lick the phantom breath on his neck.

"Want me to walk you to the door?" Steve asked. Not a light was on

in the Hargrove-Mayfield house, weird for the time of evening, and only Billy's car sat flaccid and underwhelming in the yellow lamplight.

"I think I'll be okay," Max said, but made no move to exit the car. Her eyes were glued to the glassed in veranda, like the house's secrets would seep in there to be observed, assessed and contained. Her cupid's bow pinched with worry.

"I'll come up anyway," He said, before popping the locks. Max sat in the car for so long that Steve thought she might not join him, before something steeled in her face and she shoved her door open. Concrete slapped under her Vans as she marched up to the front door, Steve right behind her when she tried the handle. Locked.

"Billy!" She screamed, before pounding the door with her first. The wood shook and Steve glanced over his shoulder beyond the glass mudroom walls. Shapes moved in the darkness. He'd left his bat in the car.

The front door jerked open and Steve's head whipped around. Billy stood with the door open just wide enough for an eye and a wisp of his mop to poke through. "You're late," he said to Max, mouth pressed into the fresh red paint.

"You were supposed to cover for me," she said.

Billy grit his teeth. "Would have been nice if you'd said something. Susan got home two hours ago."

Steve almost missed Billy's flinch as Max pushed the door open, forcing him out of the way. The dark mouth of the house gave away nothing as the hall within was swallowed by darkness. Max threw her puffy jacket on the coat rack and turned to her brother with switchblades in her eyes. "We had a deal," she said.

"Which I can't do shit about if you're breaking curfew," Billy sneered back. Steve held his tongue against the bruises peeking out of Billy's muscle shirt, and against the slight rise in Billy's shoulders. He'd spent the night before thinking about his tongue on Billy's clavicle and his cold hands on winter mornings.

Steve's knuckles were still bruised from the other day, when he'd bit Billy and Billy bit back. He pushed his hands into his pockets and glanced between the siblings, wondered how he had a place here. "Is everything good?" he asked.

"It's fine," Max said, at the same time Billy said, "Fuck off, Harrington."

Max shoved Billy's arm. Steve couldn't believe his eyes. "Steve counts!" she hissed. There was a time, not too long ago, when Max would have cowered away from her brother's touch. When had her fists become the ones swinging?

Billy, too, seemed lost, as he lifted his fists and put them back to his sides, letting the flash of his eyes speak for his ire.

"Trust me, I've been super fucking nice to him," he said, and something in Steve's chest gave in a rush, exhaling humidity through his capillaries.

"Sure," Max said, all venom, before turning down the hall and slamming her bedroom door shut.

Steve and Billy breathed in the evening, stuck somewhere between spaces, not quite inside and not quite outside as Billy's feet shifted on the tile and Steve blinked on the cement porch. "I count for what?" Steve asked.

Billy finally met his eyes, blue to brown, earth to ocean. "Don't worry about it. Piss off."

Notes for the Chapter:

So, this chapter was going to be longer but I think I'm glad I clipped it here. As always, comments are greatly appreciated.

Speaking of which, if you see a bad typo, like, a really horribly bad typo, please let me know. My editing process is reading things over two days after posting and realizing, fuck, I wrote angle instead of angel.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter!

4. Chapter 4

Steve let his motor idle outside the Hargrove-Mayfield house for exactly fifteen minutes, just long enough for his shoulders to climb up to his ears and his breath to catch in his lungs. His bat sat in the back seat, unassuming but restless, just how Steve had felt for the last week. His nightmares had new edges and he felt somehow sharper, although not in the intelligent sense. It was like his nerves were prickly and his teeth were razors.

Billy was no more present than he was before, but Steve could feel him now. He saw him everywhere, in dreams and in the hallways at school and sipping bad gas station coffee as they both leaned against their cars as their tanks filled. They hadn't even spoken, besides on the court, but when their eyes met, Steve could feel it, that breath on his neck, the beast on his shoulders. The thing he felt in Billy's hand.

Billy had swept through the cafeteria that morning, swagger on and teeth showing. He'd leaned over the table, around Jonathan's banana and chocolate milk carton, loomed, and told Steve to be at his house for ten, said Brian was throwing a party. Well, it was ten. Billy hadn't even waited for an answer, and yet there Steve was, listening to Quiet Riot as shadows moved in the Hargrove-Mayfield house. If it was a joke, it was too late for Steve to back out.

He was seventeen. He was in Hawkins, Indian. It was March twentieth, ten seventeen in the evening, and he was sitting around like a bitch. He didn't even like Quiet Riot. He'd ended up with the cassette after Tommy H. left it in his car, and it was the only thing he could find that he thought Billy wouldn't hate.

And why the fuck did Steve care about that, anyway? It was his fucking car. He was his own person. He didn't need to change himself for a boy, he wasn't that kind of girl.

Barb fighting with Nancy at the bottom of his staircase, just within earshot of his room, fluttered through his mind and took his air with a *woosh*. That joke wasn't funny, and Steve found himself checking for his bat in the rear view, hands shaking to call Nancy for reasons other than Billy's temper sitting in his passenger seat.

“Shit, Harrington,” Billy said, making Steve jump as he yanked open the car door. “You look like crap. Someone eat your cat, or something?”

“I don’t have a cat,” Steve muttered, turning the key.

“Oh, wait, I thought you were a pussy again.”

“Oh, real clever,” Steve rolled his eyes. “Tommy H. teach you that one? He’s always had some piss poor insults to dole out.”

“And here I thought he was your buddy.”

Steve sighed back in his seat and tried to clear the embers whirling around in his mind. He hadn’t had any of the scotch he’s stolen from his dad and hid in the boot of his car, but it was looking increasingly likely that he’d drink the whole thing in one go.

“We parted ways somewhere around the time he realized I actually loved Nancy. Which was fucking hypocritical, since he’s been with Carol for like, five years, and there’s no way she’s that good in bed.”

Billy tapped out a cigarette and placed it between his lips before shrugging. “I’d say he thinks with his dick, but it’s more like he doesn’t have a brain,” he said as he cupped the flame to his lips and took the first drag.

“God, he’s such a douchebag.” Steve laughed. “I used to think we were such tough shit together, you know? He was my best friend, but seriously, I think it’s because there’s like, five people in Hawkins, and he happened to be the one who let me borrow his blocks in kindergarten.”

“Hey,” Billy pointed with his cigarette, “That douchebag knows how to have a good time, though. Got to give him that.”

“What, know that first hand?” Steve asked. “He give you a good time, Hargrove?”

“Oh, Stevie. I didn’t know he was fucking you as well as Carol.”

Steve slapped Billy’s chest, reflexive and playful, and Billy grabbed

Steve's wrist the same second Steve realized what a fire-starter that could be. But when he glanced at Billy, Billy was wearing one of his trademark alligator grins, all charming teeth and eyes just to the left of dangerous. "Keep it in your pants, Harrington," he crooned. "We've got a long night ahead."

"The fuck are you doing here, Steve?" Tommy H. slurred. If the solo cup in his hand wasn't a dead giveaway, his glossy eyes explained just how many drinks he'd already tossed into his slowly pudging belly. The insult was already on Steve's teeth, lodged below his tongue, but he held, drank from his flask, watched Billy slowly wag his tongue next to him as he took in the crowd.

What actually came out of Steve's mouth was, "I hear people have been saying some things about me? Just, you know, little things, like I can't drink anymore, like Nance cut off my balls. And that you started them? But they probably don't know that you wet the bed until you were like, fourteen, so you're probably telling the truth."

Billy grinned next to him, all teeth, and unzipped his leather jacket. He was shirtless, strong. Steve pulled off his letterman and pushed up the sleeves of his sweater.

"It was real nice of Carol to keep that secret, by the way. Didn't she wake up in your piss one time?" He continued, tossing his jacket on the pile of coats consuming the front hall.

Tommy's face was red. His fists were clenched as tightly as his jaw, his cup scrunched and splitting between his fingers.

"I mean, you told people you were fucking in the seventh grade, so that probably happened at least once. Or did Tommy J. tell me that? I honestly can't remember."

"You're going to shut up right now," Tommy said, "Before you regret that shit."

But Steve didn't regret it. Tommy'd been pushing him all month, seeing how far he could go, never expecting the scales to tip. Tommy

liked to poke at people who were down, people like Byers who kept their eyes on the floor and their shoulders high. Byers didn't give a fuck, but Tommy didn't know that. Steve'd been good at ignoring it, too. But recently, the scales had been tipping in increments. Steve felt the thud as his side hit the ground. He could already taste the blood in his mouth.

Then Carol was at Tommy's side, drunk herself and blouse slipping sideways enough for her green bra to peek out the side. "Baby," she said, "C'mon, I want to dance." And Steve wasn't drunk enough yet to deal with her whiney bullshit.

He slipped past Tommy, giving him a hearty thump on the shoulder as he went, slap just shy of too hard. Billy was right on his heels, already heady from adrenaline and his stolen sip of scotch, and Steve felt drunk on Billy's energy, powerful and hungry in a way he hadn't in months, maybe years. Hawkins had gone soft around the edges with Nancy holding his hands, and he could damn well walk by himself.

It was around half his flask that he found himself swaying with his hands tight around Sammy Tayler's waist, her head tilted back against his shoulder as she twisted her hips to the music. Steve didn't know the song, but it was something loud, something with heavy drums, something he could feel in his bones, and he was sure he'd heard it blaring out of Billy's car in the school parking lot one morning, when Steve had been running late and Billy had been intentionally tardy.

Steve tightened his arms and kissed Sammy's neck, rocking his hips into her ass. She was almost as tall as him, blonde, blue eyed, and liked tight jeans and short sweaters. Her lips were painted pink and coated the underside of Steve's jaw with lacquer as she turned her head to mouth his jaw.

Haze hung in the air, from cigarettes and something decidedly skunkier, mixing with teenage sweat and spilt beer. Someone had turned the pot lights down to a dim glow, which cast the corners of the room in shadows and made everything rosy and gold.

Across the room, Billy's bare chest looked like caramel cream, smooth and slick. Steve followed a trail with his eyes, up the column of Billy's neck as he kissed the neck in front of him, breath ragged. But when he reached Billy's eyes, he was caught, lungs stalled as Billy stared back with danger on his lips.

Sammy turned and wrapped her arms around Steve's neck, smile coy, and called him sugar, and when she kissed him, Steve kissed back, but his eyes never left Billy, and when Billy crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, he kept staring back.

"Fuck," Steve laughed, spilling scotch all over the back seat of his BMW as he tried to refill his flask. Billy leaned against his side and stole the bottle when Steve was done. He took a long swig, gasp on his tongue when he was finished.

"I didn't know you were a light weight," Billy teased, but his hands wobbled as he put the bottle back on the seat. The glass dinged off Steve's bat. The liquid sloshed against the glass.

"I didn't know you were full of shit," Steve replied.

"Liar. We both knew that."

"You got a little something there," Tommy said, pointing at his mouth. Steve was seventeen. He was in Brian Wilton's house in Hawkins, Indiana. It was March twenty-first, probably one in the morning, and his flask was mostly empty again. Billy was somewhere. Steve had no fucking clue.

"Yeah?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Tommy said, rubbing his thumb over his bottom lip. "Didn't know you were into make-up. You start wearing dresses too? Since Wheeler made you a girl? I bet she was the one fucking you, since you're probably some fag now." He rocked his hips and moaned, a half pant leaving his drunken lips.

“You wish,” Steve bit back, but the words on his tongue belonged to someone else. “I see how you look at us in the showers, man, it’s all in the open. You’d love a good cock.”

Steve could see Billy in his mind’s eye, damp from the spray and head tilted back as his curls hung heavy around his ears. Flecks of water collected on his eyelashes like dew drops. All the guys stole peeks at one another, at least once or twice, but it was hard not to follow the curves of Billy’s back and the V of his hips. No one in Hawkins looked like Billy. None of them had seen a golden sun.

Steve felt the beast on his shoulder licking flames into his bloodstream, starting at the base of his neck and spreading up through his cheeks and down through his sternum until his body shook with it, scotch and whisky stocking the fire in his gut.

“That’s twice tonight, Harrington,” Tommy warned, throwing his empty beer cup on the ground and shrugging off his unbuttoned shirt.

“What, you going to do something about it?” Steve asked. “Gee, Tommy, I didn’t think you had it in you. I thought that’s why you followed Hargrove around. You suck his dick, he keeps the mean boys off you.”

“Hey!” Someone shouted behind Steve, but he nearly missed it over Poison wailing through the stereo and the sound of his own thrumming heart.

Tommy threw the first punch, but it wasn’t hard for Steve to dodge and throw the second. He just barely grazed Tommy’s cheek, but it was enough to get Tommy roaring. His next punch was clumsy, but it landed squarely on Steve’s face.

“Jesus, fuck,” Steve shouted as he clutched his nose. “How does anyone even put up with you? God, you even punch like a pussy. Did you get that left hook from a third grader? God, you’re pathetic.”

He was ready when Tommy came at him next, already ducking before Tommy’s fist was in the air. He lunged up and hit Tommy’s jaw with a solid clack as Tommy’s teeth jammed together. Someone, probably Carol, screamed. But Tommy wasn’t done, not even with a

bloody lip from where he'd caught his tongue between his teeth.

"You bastard!" Tommy said.

The Demogorgon loomed over Brain's beige walls, a ghastly shadow in the early morning, striking Steve's bones and flashing before his eyes. Suddenly, the dim light wasn't rosy, but gray and decaying, riddled with low lying demodogs and beasts crawling from their graves. In comparison, Tommy wasn't shit, but he got Steve around the middle and took him down like a clothesline in a hurricane.

"Steve-" someone said, but Steve wasn't listening, too busy prying Tommy off him and flipping their positions on the floor. He thought of Billy, the Byers, the Mind Flayer's maps drawn wild and swirling around the walls, floors and roof like tangled Christmas lights, and punched Tommy in the face. Then he did it again. And again.

"That's my move," Billy said, suddenly at Steve's ear. He hauled Steve up and held him against his chest. Steve leaned back, breathless, aching, and wiped his bloodied fist off on his jeans. He timed his breaths with Billy's rising chest, tried to get his pieces back aligned. He'd probably broken Tommy's nose. Fucker deserved it.

"I'm good," Steve said.

Billy let Steve go and slapped him on the back, before motioning for him to follow him outside. It was freezing, but Steve welcomed the cold, let it wash over his burnt skin like water over coals. Heat still curled in the back of his throat so he opened his mouth wide and took long, harsh breaths, hoping to flush out his demons.

Steve followed Billy until the backyard was broken by a thick forest. Each tree must have been older than Hawkins, round and sturdy and full of whispers. Billy collapsed against the back of one with a laugh and lit a cigarette. The flame of his lighter was the only light between the trees.

"Shit, Harrington. I asked you to drive because my dad took my car, but you're alright, you know that?" Billy said, offering Steve his pack

and his lighter.

Steve took the offering and leaned back against the nearest tree to light up. Like this, there was hardly two feet between their noses, not even enough room for the smoke between them to stay two separate plumes. "And here I thought it was because you liked me."

Billy snorted and took another drag. Steve could just make out the outline of his nose. "You were a real let down when I first got here. I didn't expect much from this shithole, but I expected them to at least worship a better king."

"Thanks."

"But--" Billy continued, "If this is what they got before, I'm impressed. What the hell happened to you?"

Steve thought he heard rustling in the trees, something snap in the brush, a phantom, guttural trill. He tipped his head back and tried to see the moon between skeleton tree branches. It was useless. He was seventeen. He was in Hawkins, Indiana. It was March twenty-first, probably one thirty in the morning, and the sky was black with bloated clouds.

"A lot of shit," he said slowly. "A lot of bad shit."

He fumbled his flask out of his pocket and knocked it back, hissing as he wiped his mouth with his inner elbow. Billy stole it from his hand and drank the rest.

"That Wheeler girl?" Billy asked.

"Something like that," Steve said, but didn't pull his eyes from the sky. His focus was on the cold, on the way his arms were stinging where his sleeves were rolled up and the way the chill sucked the smoke from his lungs. He welcomed winter to silence the summer rising in his chest and the licking heat he'd punched into Tommy's face.

"Well, you got to be more subtle," Billy said. "Picking fights with guys like Tommy H. is going to get your ass handed to you."

Steve laughed a dry, aching thing. "You're telling *me* to not get in fights?"

"You're shit at them," Billy said, gesturing with his cigarette. The ember was a firefly in the night. "You're lucky Tommy's a clumsy drunk."

"Or maybe Tommy is lucky that he's got you watching his back."

"Want to run that by me again?"

Steve took a drag and kept looking for the stars. The ice in his veins was melting, growing sticky hot. "That's what I said in there. You didn't hear? You suck each other's dicks. You proved my point."

Steve didn't know where the words were coming from, or why they clunked out of his mouth half-formed, thoughts he hadn't had until they were lying in the snow, burning holes until they rested against charred grass. Heat pooled behind his eyelashes. Nancy clutched textbooks to her chest. Billy's eyes bore into his mouth.

"I've changed my mind, Harrington, I think you've got a death wish."

"Dustin does say I smoke too much. Cigarettes cause cancer, you know."

"Fuck Dustin."

"Hey, he's a good kid."

"You suck his dick?" Billy asked, stepping away from his tree and leaning in to Steve's face. Steve kept his chin up. "Maybe it's not mommy you're fucking. Do I got to call the police?"

Billy's words rolled just below a growl, heavy as they pressed against Steve's chest. "If that's your game, Harrington, I got to know. Max sits in your car. Right by your stick shift."

"Yeah, you and Tommy'd know a lot about stick shifts."

Billy stabbed the end of his cigarette into Steve's forearm and pressed hard, teeth nearly invisible in the inky black. Steve cried out, swung,

and caught Billy in the ear, so Billy shoved Steve hard, harder than he had in the bathroom, harder than he had that slushy night in February, and slammed Steve's body into the tree with force enough to rattle his bones.

Steve felt the vibrations in his teeth, through the heat in the roof of his mouth. He loathed the beast that lined his gut with twigs and leaves, nesting for the frosts and poisoning his tongue.

"Billy--" he croaked, and Billy kissed it from his mouth.

Tommy H. did have a broken nose, as well as two black eyes and a new tilt to his sneer. Carol followed him around the halls at school like a nurse, cooing over his dramatic winces and impassioned monologues about *that fucking Harrington*.

The halls parted for Steve as he moved from class to class, his own shiner and split lip painting victory across his face. It was strange, Steve thought, how easy it was to carry his books and nod his head, bob back along to his own beat like he'd never taken a step back from the crowd.

He was seventeen. He was in Hawkins High, Indiana. It was March twenty-third, eight fifteen in the morning, and Steve had spent the last two days smoking on his back patio, wondering how many times he could look at his pool before he stopped seeing Barb. His parents were home, so he couldn't smoke inside. He missed pretending that the universe ended with his consciousness, that there was nothing behind his bedroom walls and Billy Hargrove's neck.

His black eye channeled the rot he was feeling, festered it into a feeling he could get behind.

He paused at Nancy's locker and leaned into her with one arm propped up, soft smile on his face. "Hey, missed you at Brian's the other night," he said.

"Jesus," Nancy said, brows pinched the second she saw his face. He could see the lower left corner of his mouth in the mirror hung in her

locker, placed too low for someone of his height.

"I go by that sometimes."

"Steve, what the hell happened to your face?"

"You haven't heard?" Steve shrugged. "Tommy H. picked a fight. Tommy H. lost that fight. I'm okay, Nance, really."

If anything, his insistence made her frown worse. She reached up to poke the dark bruise under his eye, already turning green around the edges, and closed her hand into a tight fist as she let it drop. "Are you sure this wasn't Billy?" she asked softly.

Gunk clumped in Steve's chest, seeping up to block his throat. He fought around the bile as he clutched his textbooks, aware that no matter what words he came up with, he couldn't explain them, and Nancy wouldn't believe them. She couldn't. He couldn't. Not yet.

"It wasn't," he said, curt, sharp.

"It's just--" she closed her locker door "—I heard someone saying you were with him last night."

"I was."

"Then." Nancy didn't know what to put after then, obvious between her pinched lips.

"Don't worry about him, Nance," Steve said. "I'm not worried about him."

Billy was sitting on the damp concrete under the bleachers when Steve found him just before lunch. There was a cigarette butt on the ground already, still hot, and another held between Billy's teeth as he fiddled with the pocket of his jean jacket. Steve sat and ripped open his paper lunch bag, ignoring Billy's tilted lips as he took the first bite of his sandwich.

"Mommy dearest home?" Billy asked.

“Yup,” Steve said.

“Bet she liked your eye.”

“Oh, it was her favourite part. Best ‘honey, we’re home speech’ I’ve gotten in a long time. ‘Look what we got in Chicago—oh, Steve, let me get you some peas.’”

“Did you need the peas?”

“Nah, it was too late by then.”

Billy nodded and reached across to steal half of Steve’s sandwich. Steve stole the cigarette from his lips in kind, inhaled long and slow, letting the ash mix with stale rye, Swiss cheese and Black Forest ham. Honestly, it didn’t make the food taste much different, but it settled the heat in his chest. Steve had been doing a lot of settling, since he let Billy drive them home drunk at three on Sunday morning and spent until ten staring at Billy’s snoring mouth, counting exhales.

“Your parents say anything?” Steve asked. “You know, about you not coming home Friday?”

Billy took the cigarette back, watched the field between the metal bleacher steps. The grass was getting long and clouds rolled lazy and plump across the gray afternoon sky. He pinched the cigarette between his thumb and index finger and rolled it slightly as he held the smoke in his mouth. He said, “Yeah.”

“Are you going to tell me what they said?”

“No.”

Steve took another bite of his sandwich and stared between the slats as well, let the cold ground freeze through his jeans.

“Are you going to tell me why that bat was in your car again?” Billy asked.

Steve stole the cigarette. “No.”

Billy nodded his head, rest his cheek against the bleachers, and stared

out, out, past anything Steve could imagine seeing, and Steve leaned with him, pressed his mottled skin to the freezing metal and let it burn.

"Jesus, Steve," Dustin said, plopping into the passenger seat of Steve's BMW.

"Oh, come on, not you too."

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter kind of got away from me and it's a day late (and probably riddled with errors), but I hope you enjoy!

5. Chapter 5

Steve was seventeen. He was in Hawkins, Indiana. It was March twenty-eighth, six twenty-seven in the evening, and he lay on a pool chair in his back yard without a jacket, an early spring warm spell melting the night. His parents weren't home, and the dark corners inside made him wary of creeping teeth and waving tails. At least outside, he'd have somewhere to run.

His bat was under his chair beside his beer, which had been long forgotten. Steve closed his eyes and focused on the rushing breeze cutting through his sweater like sheets of rain.

He hadn't slept in two days. Every time he closed his eyes he thought of Billy in the dark, eyes not even glinting under the hidden moon, his lips vivid in Steve's mind from how close they had brushed, how plump and chapped they felt against his chin. Billy's frown had been clear without seeing his brows, but Steve had needed it, needed to drink up every press and pull of that mouth.

When they shared cigarettes during lunch Steve thought of the way Billy's fingers had held his hips and the way his knuckles scraped against the knobby tree in Steve's back. He thought of the whisky on Billy's breath.

The cigarettes formed a bridge between them, tucked together by their pinkies. Steve could only see fog from his side, fog and blue eyes, like Christmas lights, and solo cups dotting the ground like knocked teeth.

Steam came off the pool and hung around Steve's ankles, the blue lights casting everything in a misty glow. Steve hadn't bothered turning on the porch light, so the world was inky and blue, extending only as far as the water and the creatures in Steve's mind.

"Hey," Billy shouted, banging on the front door.

Steve sat up straight. He smoothed down his shirt. "In the back," he called. He didn't ask how Billy knew where he lived.

Billy hurdled the back gate and swung his keys around his finger, catching them in his hand. "Isn't it cold?" he asked, and Steve shrugged. It was.

"Not for this time of year."

Billy made a face like he disagreed, like he'd never been anywhere so cold in his entire fucking life, because he probably hadn't, and sat down on the pool chair next to Steve, legs sideways and elbows on his knees.

"You got a light?" he asked, and Steve reached down for the lighter he'd tossed on the ground by his beer and his bat, right next to the cigarettes he forgot to smoke. Billy eyed the ground where the lighter had been and looked Steve right in the eye as Steve turned sideways on his own chair and leaned in close to cup the cigarette Billy held with this thumb and index finger. He kept holding his eyes right up to the second the flame took. In that second, with Steve grasping the familiar lighter in his hand, something caught fire in his gut, twisting like hot vines slithering through the Upside Down, sliding over his belly and creeping up his throat.

"Billy--" he said, and Billy's eyes shot open.

"Don't call me that," Billy said. "Don't say it, Harrington."

"But it's your *name*."

"Don't fucking say it," Billy said. "I can't hear it--" *from your lips*, Steve finished. Wishful thinking.

So Steve leaned forward and squared his shoulders, looked Billy right in the eyes again, moved so close that there was no way in hell Billy could look away and said, "Billy."

And Billy cracked down the middle, face collapsing like a building in an earthquake, like one of the ones Billy would have seen in California.

"Why are you here?" Steve asked, not unkind, but somewhere borderline, the heat behind his eyes and his cheeks making him restless.

“Fuck if I know,” Billy said. “I couldn’t go home.”

Steve nodded like that actually meant something. Maybe it did. “Your dad?”

Billy laughed when he nodded in return, but it was a ragged, gasped thing, the driest laugh Steve had ever heard. “Yeah.”

They sat in silence, listening the wind rustling through the trees until Billy asked, “What’s with the bat? It’s fucking weird, you know. Don’t think I didn’t see it in your car.”

Steve shrugged and hedged his bets. “Monster hunting?” he offered.

Billy’s smile stayed tight, but his eyes strayed to the pool. “Do you remember that night at Byers’ freaky house?”

Steve snorted and raised his eyebrows. “You beat my face in, but you didn’t give me brain damage.”

“Shut up. I thought I was going to kill you, maybe, but Max drugged me with something. Like, why the fuck did Byers even have that shit in his house? But like, she drugged me. And she slammed a bat just like that between my legs. Told me to shape up.”

Steve glanced at his bat and picked it up, holding it reverently on his lap. “It’s the same one, actually.”

“She gave it to you?”

Steve shook his head. “It’s mine. Monster hunting, remember?”

Billy took a long breath and let smoke stream out of his mouth. Steve could see the word bullshit rattling around in Billy’s brain. “Whatever,” Billy said. “You’re kind of fucked up, aren’t you?”

Steve shrugged and let the wind bite him. “Probably.”

When Billy said nothing, Steve stood from the pool chair and walked towards the sliding back door, swinging the bat around once before placing it under the unlit porch light. When he turned around, Billy was behind him, eyes dark with shadows and something Steve

couldn't name.

"Billy," Steve said again, and Billy stepped forward until Steve had his back to the wall, his hands on the lapels of Billy's leather jacket. He wondered how he was always the one cornered, when his blood was singing for a fight. He could feel his veins gurgling, hot and sticky, the beast on his shoulder breathing into his ear. He needed. He needed.

"I said not to say it."

"Would you rather queer?"

"I could kill you."

Steve met his eyes, breathed the lingering smoke from Billy's lips, remembered the cigarette burn on his arm, still stinging a week later and said, "Please."

Billy met him somewhere in the middle, mouth hot and stubble scratching Steve's cheeks. Steve slide his hands around Billy's neck and tucked one up into his hair, pulled just hard enough to make Billy moan as Billy bit his lip in retaliation.

"I hate you," Billy breathed, and Steve kissed it from his lips.

Steve dreamed of sun dresses, blue pool lights, Barb, Nancy, and Billy's strong arms holding him against that tree in Brian's back yard. He dreamed of Max's pensive face as they drove away from the Byers', and how Billy looked at when she hit him, how the fire was different when Steve hit him, and how Nancy's eyes had sparked the first time Steve saw her hold a gun.

He dreamed of hot, tangling vines, and a deep weight pressing him into the earth. But it wasn't crushing. It was grounding.

Steve was seventeen. He was in Hawkins, Indiana. It was March twenty-ninth, seven oh two in the morning, and Billy's head rest

heavy on Steve's shoulder as Steve listened to the grandfather clock ticking down the hall, counting the seconds until he absolutely had to push Billy away to get ready for school. His parents were going to come home that night. His house was a mess. He had ten thousand things to do, but he could think of none of them, trapped by sunshine and cloying fondness.

When it was seven ten, he wriggled from under Billy and shuffled to his bathroom, checked his black eye, pulled on his hair, wondered if the newness he was feeling was pressed into his skin like pillow creases and the scars along his laugh lines. Wondered if the heat in his throat wrapped like a tattoo around his neck.

As he showered, he thought about the electricity in his bones, and whether it was going to leech into the water and zap him, kill him dead. Billy would find him with his head cracked against the ceramic and it would be such a pathetic tragedy. Poor Steve Harrington, dead by slipping in the shower. It would be so mundane for someone who fought demons. Steve kind of liked the idea.

"Harrington?" Billy called as Steve got out of the shower. "I've got to go get Max."

"Bye," Steve said. He wrapped a towel around his waist and stepped into his bedroom, but Billy was already gone.

Not much changed. Steve was seventeen. He was in Hawkins, Indiana. It was April twentieth, ten thirty in the morning, and Steve had hardly seen Billy outside of basketball practice and classes, only catching glimpses of him as they both ghosted through the hallways between periods. Billy was never under the bleachers anymore, but sometimes, when their paths crossed and Steve was feeling taught and dangerous, Steve would corner Billy behind a locked door and Billy would kiss him wordlessly before slipping away.

It was dark in the supply closet, darker than that forest or Steve's back yard, and Billy had his arms around Steve like a belt pulled too tight, Steve pressing him into the wall with hands on his neck to hold him still.

Billy wiggled his hands under Steve's shirt and ran them over his back, and Steve felt like he was a cartography expedition, the curves of his back being catalogued by Billy's hands like Steve was learning his mouth, trying to draw an outline for places yet unnamed.

Steve didn't want to call these new places something. Couldn't bare it. Wasn't willing to create words for things that didn't belong to him, that only belonged to him when he was feeling violent and raw. He wasn't gay and Billy wanted to rip his guts out.

But Steve pressed his chest to Billy's and moaned when Billy slipped a leg between his thighs, slipped a hand down low enough to feel Billy's abdomen through his open shirt. No bruises this week, just smooth, warm summer skin, that Steve knew better with his fingers than with his eyes.

In these fleeting moments, he could feel his pieces rattling around, surging from his chest and out his mouth as he pressed them into Billy, kisses hard and deep. But he couldn't coax Billy to speak. Couldn't make him stay.

He broke the kiss and stared into the darkness, a spew of words kept confused and molten on his tongue. "I'm going," he said, and felt Billy nod.

Steve was seventeen. He was in Hawkins, Indiana. It was April twenty-second, eleven thirty in the morning, and Steve sat under the bleachers, already on his second cigarette, picking at his lunch and looking across the field.

Nancy had started to complain that he spent too much time on his own. Maybe he did. He told himself he wasn't waiting for anyone as he pulled apart pieces of bologna and gouda. He just liked the stillness of swaying grass and mild spring breezes.

There was no warning.

“There’s this dragon,” Dustin explained, “And it’s circling this elvish castle while we’re there for Princess Cordenia’s twenty-first birthday.”

Steve was seventeen. He was at his kitchen table in Hawkins, Indiana. It was May first, seven thirty three in the evening. Steve had no fucking clue what Dustin was talking about and was bobbing his head like he wasn’t bored to tears. The last month had been hard, Steve seeing teeth in every shadow and blue burning ropes strangling him in his dreams.

Hawkins was killing him, choking ever so slowly, like his nearly failed report cards and judging looks from his parents weren’t enough to suffocate him. With Nancy, he’d had a lifeline. Before the Upside Down melded with the face of Hawkins, he could stomach the panic. But it was worse. The panic was worse. His grades, his parents, the empty house, the nothingness he felt in the universe, but the awareness of what lingered outside, the delusion of hiding in Billy’s cologne—all of it was nothing to the sense of hot burbling under his skin, making him short tempered and wild.

He wanted to tell Dustin to shut up and go home, but he couldn’t.

“So,” Dustin said, “The dragon bursts in and lights like, the entire ball room on fire, killing like half the nobles instantly, which kind of sucks, but was also sort of cool because Mike let us search their bodies after, but anyway, all these people die so of course, we have to fight this dragon. The princess is in danger and it would be really shitty if we let her die.”

“Wait, I thought part of the game was making your own choices? Like, if you were evil or whatever letting her die and leaving the dragon alone would character building?”

“Yeah, but that would be boring, fighting a dragon is fucking cool.” Dustin waved a hand and stuffed some pizza in his mouth. Steve’s parents had left that morning for a conference in Louisiana and the house felt too big when Steve felt so wired, like he was rattling around in a container of jelly beans.

“Anyway,” Dustin said, rolling his eyes. “We roll initiative and I’m

stuck going first. Which actually turns out pretty good, because I roll a nat. twenty and manage to stun the dragon—”

A heavy knock at the back door made Dustin jump, shook Steve out of his skin. “We already got the pizza,” Dustin said slowly. No shit. Steve didn’t remind him that a delivery man would be at the *front door*, instead getting up to investigate.

Steve was seventeen. He was in Hawkins, Indiana. It was May first, seven forty in the evening, and Billy Hargrove had a bloody nose and a hand on the glass door, his other hand clutched around his stomach

“Jesus, Billy,” Steve said.

“Not Jesus,” Billy said, swollen lip filling his mouth with marbles. “My dad.”

“Jesus,” Dustin said, peaking around the corner.

Billy’s face went dark, tongue sliding along his lips in warning. “The fuck are you doing here, kid? Go home.”

“Steve drove me--”

“Take his fucking bike.” Billy sneered, eyes wild, and Dustin turned on his heel.

“What the fuck?” Steve hissed, the bile in his throat hot from anger and something else as he heard the front door slam shut.

Billy’s eyes were red, and his shoulders raised, jean jacket soaked from spring rain and hair plastered to his neck. “Let me see,” Steve said, but Billy backed against the wall.

“I think he’s looking for me,” Billy said.

“Who?”

“My *dad*.”

The pieces all clicked at once, filling Steve’s chest with an angry flush, obvious and hot on his neck. “I’m going to kill him,” he found

himself saying, before the thought had fully registered. “Tell me where he is, I’ll put him in the fucking ground.”

“I tried that,” Billy said. Steve doubted the truth of it, right down in his bones. Billy had a big mouth, but he’d wavered in the doorway of his house, looked small in the darkened hall.

“You can hide here.”

Billy shook his head. “I have to go.”

“Go?”

“Somewhere. Not Hawkins. I drove here, but--”

Steve’s brows scrunched. “Are you saying goodbye?”

“I’m saying you have to drive my fucking car.”

Which was how Steve found himself sitting in front of his father’s safe, turning the dial he’d cracked when he was fourteen and obsessed with spy television shows, so he could stuff the paper half of his college fund into the pocket of his duffle bag, right alongside his tooth brush and six pairs of clean underwear. Billy leaned against the front door while Steve ransacked his house for clothes and vodka, stuffing two duffle bags with essentials. He didn’t know how long they’d be gone, or how far they’d go, but Billy impressed that it should be now, and it should be far, and Steve wanted go where Billy took him, as far from Hawkins as he could get.

He felt willing, pliant, bitter under his skin and burning up, burning out, obsessed with the electricity in veins. He was terrified.

Maybe it didn’t even have to do with Billy. Steve was seventeen. He was in Hawkins, Indiana. It was May first, seven fifty-five in the evening, and stale, phantom, fluttering ashes clogged his throat as he rushed to push the poison of Hawkins of his blood.

He didn’t really understand why, but his body had moved the second Billy suggested they leave. He just needed to move. Needed to do

something, before he combusted.

Steve was seventeen. He was in Jeffersonville, Indiana. It was May first, ten thirty at night, when Billy collapsed in the passenger seat like an empty grocery bag.

Steve was still learning the ins and outs of the Camaro, how the clutch popped and the gas pedal surged. He got the vibe that no one had ever driven this car, not since Billy got it, other than Max that one, horrible night, when Steve was bloody and useless in the back seat, watching in horror every time they swerved around a stop sign. He was about to make a joke about something stupid, maybe about Billy's dumb music, when he glanced over and spotted Billy out cold.

"Billy," he said, and got nothing. "Billy," he tried again, slapping Billy's chest. Nothing. He got nothing.

Some gasping sound seeped from his throat as he quickly pulled off to the side of the road. "Billy," he said, again, twisting until he could see Billy's eyes. Billy looked ragged, dead, and when Steve leaned forward to check his temperature, kissing his forehead like Steve's mom had when he was six, Billy's forehead was on fire, slick with sweat.

Steve sat back in his seat, took a deep breath, crushed his pride, and started looking for the nearest gas station.

"Excuse me," he said to a tired attendant who looked a little bit high and a little bit like his soul died in '81. "Do you know where I can find the nearest hospital?"

The guy made a few vague hand gestures, jumbled some words just shy of mystery stew, and Steve nodded like he understood more than take a left, follow this road, take another left, and it should lead you there. Can't miss it. Big sign.

Billy looked worse when Steve returned to the car. His face was pale, like the sun had left his skin, but the bags under his eyes were black. Steve drove fast, feeling like a fever, swerving around corners like the

devil himself, or maybe like Billy.

Notes for the Chapter:

So. This got longer than I intended and I realized it would actually work better as two chapters, so now you also get one some time next week. Thanks for reading!

6. Chapter 6

Steve was eighteen. He was in Jeffersonville, Indiana. It was May third, ten in the morning, and he was spending his eighteenth birthday cramped in a plastic hospital chair, listening to Billy Hargrove's heart monitor beep steadily across the room, unable to sleep as he counted the beats in time with Billy's breaths.

His mother would be worried. He had left a note, but it was a vague, unforgiving thing with no more than a dry laugh and an apology, punctuated by his name. It had been two days. She'd be coming home that night. He would have to find a moment to call her.

He squinted up at the ceiling tiles and ran a hand through his hair, wanted a cigarette, thought about his mom telling him not to smoke indoors. If he didn't call that night, she'd think it was odd that he was missing, but would assume he was out with friends. She would be hurt, but not concerned, and Steve locked that ache away somewhere deep in his belly, where it had lived for years.

His mother might not have been around much once he turned fifteen, but she'd wanted to see her baby become a man. Maybe someday soon, when he was ready, he would visit and show her his scars, the ones that made him a man over a year ago when he swung a bat at a monster more terrible than a child's fever dream. He would show her the things he didn't yet understand that sat heavy in the room, tight by the warm coil of fear lingering in his chest, hot behind his eyes. He'd show her the broken first knuckle on Billy's left index finger and the way Billy's hand fit perfectly around his knee.

Steve had spent May first and most of May second curled into a ball in the waiting room, chewing on his nails and longing for the vodka in the Camaro. He wanted to smoke. He wanted to smoke so badly that he'd gone through almost a pack. He'd run out the glass doors and kept his eyes on the waiting room, inhaling and exhaling quickly under the cracked cement awning, just out of range of rushing May showers. He'd counted the seconds he was out there, eating smoke, and the seconds in between when he was fetal and ridged on the

ancient, mothly chairs lining the walls inside, waiting for the second someone told him he could see Billy.

It was cold in the hospital. Eventually, a graying nurse with kind eyes told him he should go home. His friend was faring well, but would take no visitors until tomorrow. Steve wasn't family.

The only family Billy spoke of was the one he'd left behind, the one who the nurses had had called when Billy had been admitted, and the one who had told the nurses to fuck off. Billy's dad wasn't coming. No one was coming. But even if Steve was the last person on the entire planet willing to hold Billy fucking Hargrove's hand, it didn't mean shit if he *wasn't family*.

Steve had wanted to scream, so the second he was in the driver's seat of the Camaro, door slammed shut and hands on the wheel, he did. Then he drove around for approximately an hour looking for the cheapest, shadiest motel within reach that would accept cash from a minor, but might also call the cops if he got stabbed.

The place he found was old and water stained, each room costing approximately dirt per night. The pipes rattled when Steve turned the faucet for his first shower in days. He tilted his face into the spray like he could count the water droplets, even tried to for a second, tried not to think of the dew drops on Billy's lashes when they stood side by side in the locker room showers. Tried not to think of Nancy with her fingers in the sky, tangled in rain.

The driving had given Steve a lot of time to think, as had the evening he spent lying on one of the floral print twin beds in the motel, eyes glued to the yellowed stucco, all the lamps on.

School wasn't out for the summer yet. If he left, really left, he would be short too many credits to graduate. He would have to drop out, or re-enroll, or take summer school. Nancy wouldn't be there help him. She wouldn't be able sit with him on his back patio and draw long, looping red lines through his history homework.

For a while, he tried to sleep, but when sleep was hopeless, he smoked, tapping out his ashes into the tray he'd moved to rest on the thinning duvet.

Going home was still an option. It was always going to be an option, the nebulous sort of way that being an optometrist was always going to be an option. Steve just didn't feel it in his gut. The only eyes he saw in his dreams that night had been Billy's, half-mast and deep blue, lying at the other end of a king sized gurney.

So, in the morning, he'd driven back to the hospital and planted himself in the waiting room until finally, finally, someone let him in. The nurse said Billy was awake. Steve said he was Billy's friend. The idea had stalled him. He'd never rolled the concept around on his tongue. What was he in relation to Billy? Marbles in a jar. A tree falling in a forest.

When he walked through the door to Billy's room, Billy had said, "Shit, Harrington, you stayed."

And Steve had shrugged his shoulders up to his ears, stuck his hands in his jacket pockets and said, "Where the fuck was I supposed to go?"

Steve now held his knees to his chest, smelled sanitizer and linoleum, counted Billy's breaths.

The looming threat of hospital bills made Steve sick, but not as sick as the look on Billy's face as the doctor explained internal bleeding and a cracked rib. He would be okay, they said, but they had to keep him a few days, they said.

A few days was already bleeding into an eternity as Steve rested his chin on his knees.

"Harrington?" Billy said, groggy.

Steve let his knees drop and sat up straight. He felt caught, but had no fucking clue why. "Hey, man. How you feeling?"

"Shit," Billy said, staring at the ceiling. Steve tried to see what he was looking at. There was nothing there but speckled tiles, the same ones above Steve. Maybe Billy saw something in the pattern that he didn't.

“Yeah,” Steve said.

“I kind of expected you to bring your stupid bat in here.”

“It’s in the car.”

“Shit, really? When’d you do that?”

“While you were bleeding in the passenger seat, apparently,” Steve said, shrugged.

“Think you’ll need it here?” Billy asked, eyes to the ceiling and words dry.

“I don’t know.”

“Are there lots of monsters to hunt in Indiana?” Something cruel glossed over Billy’s eyes, making the edges of his question sharp.

Steve held a breath before letting it go slow and said, “Maybe.” He needed a cigarette.

“You’ve got to tell me the truth, man. You know my shit. And you keep feeding me this garbage like you think I’m twelve. I basically died and the TV here is awful. Watched it all day yesterday. You owe me. Tell me or put me out of my misery, I don’t care which.” He grimaced. “Just make it fast, before I throw up again.”

Steve knew Billy’s logic was completely flawed, knew it in the deepest part of his bones, but he felt the words burbling up his throat anyway, tangy and clogging like blood. He was going to cough it up, scientists and government agents and contracts be damned. Something about Billy’s face made Steve feel like he was going smash every mirror he saw for the rest of his life. The beast clenched behind his teeth wanted sympathy.

So Steve hedged his bets, choked out what bile he could. He shuffled to the edge of his seat, leaned his elbows on his knees and said, “Barb didn’t die from some shit leeching from the lab. She died in my pool. A monster got her. The kind of science shit you only see in movies.”

“A monster?” Billy eventually asked.

“A monster.”

“I’ve got to hand it to you, Harrington,” Billy said, the snarl on his mouth and glint in his eyes making Steve feel electric. “You’ve got a great imagination. Really goddamn spectacular.”

“You asked,” Steve said.

“Yeah,” Billy said, turning towards the door. “Thought you might actually tell me.”

And maybe it was better Billy didn’t believe. Better that Steve’s wounds stayed imaginary, unlike the ones laid bare across Billy’s abdomen and his broken nose, or like the obviously wrong bend in Billy’s left index finger. But it still hurt when Billy said, “Fuck off. Go home.” Because Steve wasn’t going anywhere.

“Where are you?” Nancy asked.

Steve was eighteen. He was in a shitty motel room in Jeffersonville, Indiana. It was May third, nine thirty at night, he could hear the tinny anger in Nancy’s voice as she filtered through the phone line. He could see the pinched look on her face as she curled the chord around her fingers, tangling her hand in the coils until she was trapped.

“Jeffersonville--” Steve started.

“What the hell are you doing in Jefferson?” Nancy asked. “You asshole, you’ve been missing for days. Dustin said he last saw you with Billy and we all thought he’d thrown your body in Lover’s Lake or something.”

“I promise I’m not in the lake.”

“No shit,” Nancy said. Steve could almost see her rubbing her brow. He wanted to kiss it from her forehead, felt the phantom pull forward and jerked himself back.

Instead, he tangled the dingy yellow coils of the motel phone around

his own fingers and said, "We just had to go, Nance."

Nancy sighed. Steve stared at his socked feet where they met the striped brown carpet. It occurred to him that the fibers were probably off-white, once. He should have kept his shoes on.

Nancy said, "We were throwing you a party tonight. At the Byers."

Steve had known the guilt would come, had felt it creeping up his spine as he flew down dusty side streets with Billy in the passenger seat, but wasn't prepared for the gasp it yanked from his chest. He had to learn how to breathe. All he said was, "I'm sorry, Nance. We had to go."

"Go where?"

"Anywhere."

"Why with him?"

Steve had to think on that one. Why with Billy? What was the thing sitting low in chest, making him sharp and brash, gnashing his teeth like an animal? He thought of twisting, tangling vines, the heat licking his back, and hell on fire. He thought of Billy smashing a plate over his head. He thought of four-leafed, toothy maws shouting spittle into the night.

"That's not really the point."

He could hear Nancy sigh down the line, could imagine her pinching the bridge of her nose like she did when she forgot that she didn't want to look like her mother. "Please be careful," she said. "Call me again tomorrow?"

"I can do that," he said, but he wasn't about to make any promises.

Sunset beat down on the Camaro, the sky rippling with purple and pink in the early dusk. Steve lay across the metal and watched dawdling clouds swim by, breath clear for the first time in days. Billy sat with his feet dangling over the edge, glad for his cigarette and

hands shaking. Steve stole glances at Billy's back, could guess his mood based on the slow roll of his shoulders.

They were still in Indiana. Steve was eighteen. He was in a parking lot in Jeffersonville. It was May sixth, eight thirty-five in the evening, and Billy had been released approximately half an hour ago. He hadn't said a word to Steve and Steve wasn't sure how to start the conversation, wasn't sure what they even had to talk about, other than the ten thousand things rolling around his brain, begging to be spewed all at once like Coke cans dumped into a landfill. He felt a little like a garbage truck, bed tipped sideways.

"What is this?" He eventually wondered, eyes stuck on a cloud shaped like an umbrella.

"What is what?" Billy asked. He took a long drag and flexed his spare hand. He hadn't looked at Steve in three days, not since he told Steve to leave. He'd kept his eyes on the figures moving past his hospital window, the static on tv, or the spoon hanging limp in his mashed potatoes.

Steve's muscles creaked as he sat up. Dusk made Billy's hair vibrant and rosy, soft like the sheets in Steve's mom's guest room. Steve kept his fingers under his thighs to keep them to himself.

"Where are we going?"

Billy shrugged. "Wherever. Not Hawkins. Maybe somewhere south," he said.

"Florida?"

"I don't know," Billy said, frowning. "Haven't thought that far, okay? Might just drive until I get wherever. Just know it when I see it."

Steve nodded like that answer meant something concrete, or maybe like Billy might look at him. He didn't. Billy's eyes stayed trained on the clouds. Steve's were less loyal, they kept slipping towards sun-warmed skin.

"How're your ribs?" Steve asked.

"Fine," Billy lied. "I've just got to take it easy for a while."

Steve nodded like he didn't know the truth. "You want to drive?"

Billy hopped off the car, turned on his heel, and put a hand out for the keys. "Yeah, just so we're clear, you driving her was a one-time deal."

Rain hit the roof so loud that Steve wouldn't be surprised if each drop was competing with the thunder clapping against the car. He was eighteen. He was in Kentucky, flying through backroads. It was May seventh, one thirteen in the morning, and Steve couldn't tell where the sky started and the road began. Maybe they weren't even on land anymore.

Steve had lost his sense of time and space when they first got in the car. There'd been no words since Jefferson. No looks. No casual arm brushes over the cup holders. Just their sights forward as they listened to the Camaro purr, Def Leppard humming softly over the radio.

"Shit, I can't see anything," Billy said, beating the thunder as he slapped the steering wheel. Steve could hardly make out Billy's face in the dark with little more than their own headlights brightening the cab. What he could see was scrunched and tired, too full of lines for someone seventeen.

"Maybe we should pull over?" Steve suggested. "Wait a few hours, see if we can get some sleep?"

Billy ran a hand over his face. Steve thought of Nancy pinching her nose. "Let's find a motel," Billy suggested.

"Where?" Steve asked. "Where are we going to find a motel, huh? I think the last building we saw was for cows, maybe an hour ago? We're lost. We're fucking nowhere."

"We're not lost," Billy said, tone sharpening. "We'd have to be going somewhere to be lost. I saw something about a town. We'll find it soon."

“Saw something about a town, where?” Steve sat up straighter. Warmth licked his back and crept up his ribs. He sat on his shaking hands and opened his mouth wide to let the fire out. “We don’t have a map. We don’t have shit.”

“I said you could go home,” Billy said. Steve could see Billy’s teeth glinting in the low light of the high beams, felt the danger sliding off of Billy’s tongue as he held the wheel tighter. “In fact, I think what I actually did was *told* you to go home. You wanted to be here, so shut the fuck up.”

“I wanted to be *here*.” Wherever here was, half reclined in Billy’s car, subtly aware of the ground rapidly slipping past as Billy’s foot slid against the gas pedal. “Not dead in some fucking field.”

The car lurched sideways and then down as Billy jerked the wheel, dropping Steve’s stomach out his feet as he yelped.

“Motherfucker!” Billy screamed. “Are you happy? We’re in the fucking ditch, Harrington. Right where you wanted.”

“Fuck you,” Steve shouted, hand darting out to wave at the window. “You just threw us off the road, you fucking maniac!”

Billy snatched Steve’s arm out of the air, yanking it harshly to the side at the same time Steve tried to yank it back. Their fists hit Steve’s nose, made his eyes water. He was pushing Billy back and leaping over the console to smash Billy’s shoulders into the side door before he could think better of it, before he remembered Billy’s swollen ribs and the green hospital bracelet still dancing around his wrist.

Billy met his gaze with pinched eyes and a heavy breath. He said, “I never asked you to stay. You could go wherever the fuck you want.”

Seeing Billy’s eyes for the first time in days, even in the dark, made Steve’s lungs stall and the beast in his abdomen coil for fight. He wanted to press the growl from Billy’s lips in the mud outside and keep it as a paper weight. He wanted to kiss it from his mouth. “You never made me leave,” he said.

Billy watched him a moment, mouth parted, before shoving him back. "Shut up and stop making me regret it."

Steve leaned against the door and tapped his index finger on the handle, listening to the thunder claps. Billy squeezed his hands on the wheel. When the next song ended, Steve ran a hand through his hair, done with the silence between his ears and his tight nerves itching to thrash. "I'll push," he said, unlocking the door. "Just hit the gas when I say."

It took three tries to get the car out of the ditch, and by the time the Camaro was safe, Steve was slick with muck sprayed up to his eyes, soaked to the bone, cold and shaking. "No fucking way," Billy said, looking at Steve through the open passenger side door. "No way in fucking hell, not in my car."

The rain made Steve's skin feel heavy and small, plastered tighter than his clothes. He wanted to peel it off along with his shirt and jeans at the side of the road, balling the clothes with the mud inside out and placing them under the back seat. He shuddered as he changed, naked in the middle of nowhere, nothing but low clouds and damp earth as witness.

He thought he caught a flash of blue eyes in the rear view mirror as he pulled his shirt over his head. In that field, he thought he saw a lot of things.

Monsters crept through the shadows with lolling tongues and slick black bodies, backs rolling as if they were made of rain themselves. When Steve slid back into the passenger seat, damp but mostly clean, he let his hand rest on his bat and pointedly kept his eyes from the night. He could just make out the cuts on Billy's hands in the dark.

With careful hands he pulled a cigarette from the carton in the cup holder and lit it in the dark, the spark momentarily bathing him in light. He wanted to hold on to that second the same way he held the smoke, for as long as he could dare to keep from counting.

"You look like shit," Billy said, before pulling out on to the road.

"You're lucky someone already punched you in the face this week," Steve muttered.

"Shucks, pretty boy, where'd you get a mouth like that?"

The rushing shower filled the motel room with steam, turning every fiber of moldy green carpet and torn drapery moist. Condensation fogged a framed painting of a splashing duck, unsigned where it hung just left of the door.

Steve held a cigarette in one hand and the phone in the other as he shuffled around the small circular table by the window, causing the phone cord to stretch and bunch with each lap. He was eighteen. He was in Hickman, Kentucky. It was May eighth, three twenty-seven in the afternoon, and Steve could feel the dark rings under his eyes from driving late through the night, until Billy had finally found civilization.

"Hey, mom," he said, palm of his hand pressed to his forehead, cigarette dangling. "Before you even ask, I'm fine. No one kidnapped me. I just had to get out of there for a while, figure out what I'm doing."

"What the fuck, Steve?" his mother asked. He could see the look on her face. It looked a lot like the look he'd envisioned on Nancy. "It's been a week. No calls. Just this note on your bed—which, really, on your bed? I didn't see it until two days ago! I thought you'd been murdered!"

"Yeah, I know, I'm sorry," Steve said, before taking a drag.

"What are you even going to do?" His mother asked. "You're not done school. You don't have any money. I know your grandma is generous, but this is insane--"

"I took my college fund from the safe," he said quickly. "I know. Don't even say it. But I'm not getting into any schools. My essays were awful and my only decent grades were gym and math. I don't think my exams were going to help. This is just—better, trust me, this

is better. It's not a waste."

"Steve--"

"I know this is hard to understand. It's hard to explain, but please, trust me?"

He watched out the window as a man unlocked his small yellow car and stuffed his briefcase in the back.

"When are you coming back?" Mom asked.

"I'm not. Not right now."

The man's car wouldn't start. He tried to make the engine turn over three, four times, and even through the window and across the lawn Steve could hear the harsh clunking noise the car choked around.

"Is this one of those cries you hear about? Right before suicide?" She asked. "Should we have been around more? I bet this is drugs. Is this drugs? What are you even going to do without a high school education? No son of mine is becoming a hooker."

"I'm not going to kill myself, Mom," he promised. "And I'm not a drug addict. Jesus, trust me a little, would you? I'm not going to become a hooker. You guys thought I might get a job in Hawkins, I'll just, you know, get a job out here instead. You know, make it work."

"Are you going to finish school? Where?"

"I don't know," he admitted. He took a long drag and shook his head, wondered if his parents would have stuck around more if he'd roped them into one of these conversations. "I haven't thought that far. I'll figure it out when we settle. Honestly, I've got no idea where we're going. And I don't really want to tell you where I think we're headed, either. I'm not coming back right now. I love you guys, but I can't."

The man got out of his car and walked around it twice, kicked the hubcaps, looked under the bumper with his ass in the air. Steve stopped shuffling and watched as the man popped the hood to squint at the inside of his car, inspecting for no longer than it took to shake his head before slamming the lid shut and walking back around to

driver's seat.

Absently, Steve heard the pipes gurgle as the shower shut off, the new silence pocketed by soft feet on the slippery bathroom tiles and his own breathing.

Mom sighed down the line. Steve could see her worrying her lip like she did when she wanted to say something and knew it was on the tip of her tongue, but couldn't quite put the sounds together. When she finally spoke, her voice cracked in the middle as she said, "Well. That's that then, isn't it? The house will be empty without you." As if the house wasn't always empty, as if Steve hadn't been rattling inside for years listening to echoes.

"That's it?" Steve asked, words falling from his mouth before he knew they were there.

"What do you want me to say?" Mom asked, voice clearly choked with tears, words pitching louder with every syllable. "You've made yourself clear."

The bathroom door opened with a warm gust that tickled the hairs on the back of Steve's neck. He leaned back into the heat, thought of Billy wrapping around his back like summer. "Who is it?" Billy asked, his words punctuated by a duffle bag zipping open and fabric rustling. Steve kept his eyes on the man in the yellow car, who'd started to shake his map vigorously, as if it would fix his motor. He avoided Billy's skin reflecting in the glass.

"Mom," he said.

"Mom?" Mom asked.

"Nothing," Steve said. "I'm sorry. I love you."

"Clearly not enough," She said. The line went dead. Steve sucked in a heavy breath and placed the dial tone to his chest, let it vibrate against his heart. His next drag spilled smoke into his shaking lungs. He thought he would feel guiltier.

Mrs. Henderson liked thinking Steve was respectable. Steve could no longer pretend she was right. The people in Hawkins would miss his

smiles and his charms, when they remembered him at all. Clarity was funny like that, all the pieces laid out in the most unexpected way. Standing in the motel room, looking at the man in the yellow car, Steve released the smoke in his belly, suddenly aware of how tight he'd been holding it for years. Hawkins would be fine. His parents, Nancy, Dustin, the kids—they would all be fine. They'd had each other. He'd just had them.

"Hello? Steve?" Billy asked, stepping around him to peer out the window. "What's so interesting out there?"

"That man can't start his car," Steve said.

Billy ran a hand over his jaw and wagged his tongue. "And that's our problem how?"

Steve shrugged and set the phone in the cradle.

The gas station by the motel had nothing but shitty tuna sandwiches and expired candy bars, but Billy wasn't willing to look further for food. He wouldn't explain why, but Steve had a sneaking suspicion that it had to do with the way he held his ribs when he thought Steve wasn't looking and the slight limp when he walked. Steve sat on the left twin bed with their spoils, peeling open a candy bar while Billy popped a bag of chips on the other bed. The TV stations they could get were mostly static, but Billy's eyes were stuck on them anyway, lost to the crackling news anchors warning of spring storms.

In the sun peeking through the windows, Billy's eyes were clear like rivers in summer. Steve followed the curls of Billy's hair as they tumbled to kiss the scratches on his cheeks, paused where they rested against the deep gash on Billy's jaw.

"Is that from a ring?" He asked, gesturing where the mark would be on his own face. They hadn't spoken about that first night since they'd left Steve's house, and it occurred to Steve only now that maybe there had been a reason.

But Billy wasn't angry when he reached up to touch the gash.

“Wedding ring,” Billy corrected. “My dad wears a really wide one. Hurt like a bitch.”

Steve nodded like he understood, thought of the rings on Billy’s fingers that night at the Byers’, when the word had been cold and dark, but Steve had felt alive. “I’m glad I came with you,” he said. “I’m glad you took me,” he admitted.

Billy frowned and rubbed the cut with his thumb, eyes looking through the TV. He was bruised. He was gorgeous. Slowly, he got up from the bed and crossed the chasm to sit against Steve’s headboard, their shoulders touching in the afternoon sun. He took Steve’s hand in his own and turned Steve’s palm to face the ceiling, letting his fingers coil through Steve’s until their knuckles rested bone to bone.

For a long time, they said nothing, both focused on the static.

Kissing in the light was different. That’s what Steve thought when Billy turned to mouth his jaw, kisses feather light in the afternoon sun. The TV was still crackling, but it was distant to the sound Steve’s heart and the rush of Billy’s breaths.

“Billy,” Steve said, and Billy turned to kiss it from his lips, used the turn of his waist to cup Steve’s jaw and press him into the headboard. The lines on Billy’s face relaxed as he broke the kiss to meet Steve’s eyes, lids heavy and half-mast, mouth parted around breaths. Steve slid down until Billy was forced to follow, gasp on his lips as he chased Steve down the motel bed.

Steve wrapped his arms around Billy’s waist and hooked a foot around Billy’s ankle to hold him close, pin him softly down as Billy held their hips flush and their mouths locked. Billy kissed him like he wanted to learn every inch of his insides, tongue slow but firm as Steve pressed back. Spring bloomed in Steve’s abdomen, welcoming an early summer, scorched into Steve’s skin by Billy’s willing hands.

“Billy,” Steve said again, and Billy groaned with his whole body, used the motion to bundle Steve close.

“What?” he asked.

“Why did we bother asking for two beds?”

Billy nuzzled Steve’s cheek slowly, eyes closed, and said, “There are two of us. We need two beds.”

“But--”

Billy kissed him. “They don’t need to know.”

The road stretched before them, endless as they rushed through flat farmland covered in spring vegetables and yellow flowers. Billy liked the windows open, so Steve rolled them all the way down, threw his head back to feel the sharp breeze whip past his ears. He drank in the dew of morning, squeezed his hand on Billy’s knee, and counted the drums thrumming through the speakers.

He hoped the philosophers were right.

Maybe there was just this.

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow, so, it's a few days late, but it's finally done. Thank you all for coming along with me, I hope you enjoyed the ride.

I fudged a toooooon of dates and logistics for these chapters, so no one call me out, I know, I know.

As always, comments are greatly appreciated. I'd love to hear what you think!

Also, bruh, hit me up on tumblr @eternalgoldfish. I'm always looking for good conversation, or even just memes.

Extra special thanks to demogrove for putting up with my shit, encouraging me, and helping me on the difficult parts. You're a life saver.